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A MERIT SYSTEM IN THE ARMY

A REPLY TO GOVERNOR ALLEN

BY MAJOR-GENERAL WILLIAM CROZIER, U. S. A., RETIRED

WHEN the enormous expansion of the Army brought great numbers of citizens of all degrees into close relations with it, as parts of it, or as members of voluntary organizations working with it, many of them found it different from what they had imagined, and not up to their expectations in many respects. Those officers of the regular Army who realized the deprivation of interested criticism and suggestion from without, and the loss of a certain compelling effect of improvement, difficult of attainment from within, which these evidences of concern often exert in self-contained organizations like the Army, have now, therefore, occasion to look for public comment on the shortcomings of the service, and for constructive proposals for its improvement, from citizens whose enrollment in it has given them opportunity for intimate observation, and whose standing in the community insures them both attention and influence.

An article with such intention, by Governor Henry J. Allen, of Kansas, appeared in *THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW* for July, under the title: "Wanted—Army Reorganization." In this article, Governor Allen undertakes to answer his own question: "Why did a victorious Army which made the supreme test in France come home with a 'grouch'?" He finds the answer in the fault of the regular officers. He states that the country began with a belief in the regular organization,—or, as he puts it, in "West Point,"—and exhibited "a determination to see the game through without complaint or criticism while the stress was on"; but the belief turned out not to be well founded, and the regulars failed both in staff and line.

Some of us who were operated on by the Senate Military Committee in its investigation of the War Department, during the first year of the war, find difficulty in accepting the accuracy of the Governor's testimony as to the renouncement of complaint or criticism, at least by some representatives of the people, and have not yet realized the "unquestioning attitude" which he says was adopted; and there may be justification, therefore, in examining some other of his statements to see whether they rest upon such careful ascertainment of facts as would warrant acceptance of the conclusions as sound.

The first disillusionment, according to the Governor, came through the failure of the staff departments to supply transportation, ordnance material and airplanes; the officers refusing to be hurried, and apparently proceeding upon the theory that the battle would wait until we had made a machine gun more suitable for American use than any being used in the world.

I am not well informed in regard to the supply of transportation and airplanes, but I do know something about the machine guns, having had this particular supply under my charge during the first months of the war, and for some years previously. I can throw some light, therefore, on the statement that we spent millions of dollars and valuable months of time carrying on debates and experiments in the very face of a crowded emergency which called for guns; which statement, I presume, was based on some rather free criticism of the Ordnance Department in the press, for declining to give earlier orders for Lewis guns.

The first appropriation of any significance for the supply of machine guns was made in the act of August 29th, 1916: \$12,000,000. Before that, the largest annual appropriation had been \$200,000, and it was usually \$150,000, when it was anything at all. The Ordnance Department knew perfectly well what gun it wanted to get—the Vickers type. This gun had been adopted for our service after careful test, and was also in successful and satisfactory use in the European war. Its excellence has never been questioned, and it remained in energetic manufacture, both here and in England, until the end of the war.

The Secretary of War, however, took the matter out of the hands of the Ordnance Department, and appointed a board of Army and Navy officers and civilians to consider

the subject of machine guns, and to make recommendations for the expenditure of the \$12,000,000. The board upheld the preference of the Ordnance Department for the Vickers gun, but the representatives of the Lewis gun protested the recommendation, and the board was reconvened to consider the protest. Hence the method of making use of a board delayed the placing of orders for machine guns from the first of September till the middle of December, but it was adopted by the Secretary of War in extreme solicitude to prevent any reasonable ground for dissatisfaction on the part of the proponents of the Lewis gun, who had alleged prejudice upon the part of the Ordnance Department. The motive was good, but Governor Allen will have to admit that it was more characteristically civilian than military, and was given effect by the civilian Secretary of War, who assumed the responsibility, and not by the military officers whom the Governor criticizes.

Lewis guns had been doing good service in the British Army, but as made for that Army they were not available for us, even in a single sample for test, and as made in the United States they had failed to function satisfactorily, both in test and in service. It was not until April of 1917 that the American manufacturers succeeded in turning out a satisfactory gun, after some fifteen important changes; when large and increasing orders were given, and the expansion of the factory was aided with Government funds. If, before this time, orders had been given for Lewis guns, they would have used up our money in disregard of the conclusions of the most competent advisory agencies which the War Department had known how to create, and would have left none for investment in the well known and thoroughly endorsed Vickers gun. The above facts are set forth at length in the testimony given at the Senate Military Committee's investigation of the War Department.

Governor Allen states that "finally we fought at Chateau Thierry, at St. Mihiel, and in the Argonne Forest with machine guns purchased from our war-burdened allies." This is a misleading statement. It is true that we purchased machine guns from the French Government, not "finally," but from the early period of the war, and at the cheerful suggestion of that Government, which was well able to furnish them and found financial advantage in doing so. It is also true, however, that all divisions of our troops

which went over the Atlantic after April, 1918, had machine guns of American manufacture, and all that went over after June had both machine guns and automatic rifles of the incomparable Browning type, developed in the United States. There were enough of these latter in France at the termination of hostilities to arm all the American forces, and it was the activity of the operations and not the lack of guns which had prevented their substitution for other types in the hands of the troops.

From the date of our declaration of war to the time of the armistice, we manufactured in the United States about seventy-five per cent of the number of guns made in France during the same period, and a little more than the number made in England; but, shortly after the end of the first year, we had developed a manufacturing capacity for machine guns and automatic rifles greater than that of any other country. Not a bad achievement for a set of people who had refused to be hurried, and were "hopelessly entangled in their own red tape."

Governor Allen extends his harsh criticism to other departments of supply. He says that the misrepresentation as to a plentiful supply of American ordnance and other equipment amounted to real genius in lying; although it is difficult to understand why our troops should have been concerned whether their ordnance came from America or not, as long as they had plenty of it to use against the enemy—which they did. Perhaps his general charges can best be met by a statement made by General Pershing in a letter to the Chief Ordnance Officer of the Expeditionary Force, in February last: "During active operations extending from January, 1918, when our first division entered the line, until the close of hostilities on November 11, our troops were supplied with the equipment and ammunition necessary to carry their work to a successful conclusion."

I am the last to wish to defend or to try to explain away the lamentable shortage of war material with which we entered upon the great conflict; but certainly Army officers who had tried their best to give warning, are not responsible for it; and Governor Allen's charge of incompetence to remedy it, after they had been supplied with the means, rests upon statements of fact which he surely has not verified from the published records.

When it comes to matters of personnel, as distinguished from supply, Governor Allen finds the first cause of complaint to be in the status and treatment of the enlisted men under the system which he ascribes to regular officers; and he quotes in illustration from a letter of a soldier just returned from Europe that there is too much "for officers only" in the system, and that "the enlisted man gives up everything and gets nothing." Examining this complaint in an effort to get at the substance of it, it seems to be alleged that the writer expected to get something more out of the war than an opportunity to fight the Germans, though what it is that he expected is not stated. If it is credit, this has been taken care of, for Governor Allen testifies that these men "had been cited, and decorated and 'general ordered' for their great work"; and this kind of recognition must have come, in the great majority of cases, through the recommendation of their officers. It must have been something else, but as we are not told what it is, it is difficult to devise a remedy; and we are left to wonder whether the writer represents any widespread sentiment of the kind to which the Governor attaches importance.

Another class of complaint is stated by Governor Allen to have been voiced by a young sergeant who said to him that the men had been "West Pointed to death," and that the officers forgot they were men and tried to make mere automatons of them; and he follows this up with expression of some views to the effect that there should be less of a gulf between officers and enlisted men, and more of democracy in their relations.

This is a subject which has received a great deal of discussion, and in regard to which a conclusion is difficult. It requires much precise specification to permit the formation of a judgment as to whether a practice in enforcing discipline is one of dignity and firmness, or is characteristic of a "stiff sort of snob." I could cite instances of this war in which officers have been sharply reminded by regulars of the mutuality of the respect which is due between officers and enlisted men, which are quite as striking as those advanced by Governor Allen; and probably any other officer could do the same. But this extensive subject would require an article to itself, and I will content myself with saying that it is a fundamental principle in the regular service that the respect of an enlisted man for his officer

should not be inculcated by any method which would tend to diminish that which he has for himself. Allegation that this principle is not lived up to should be supported with specific instances and not with generalizations, and should be accompanied by such proof as to establish at least a *prima facie* case that the instances are typical and not sporadic.

Although there is not to be found in the above mentioned criticisms such thoughtful presentation as to aid an effort to improve the military establishment, Governor Allen mentions one difficulty which is very real in any army. It functions for its designed purpose only occasionally. Wars being fortunately rare, a military organization passes the greater part of its existence in a sort of artificial performance, in which the problems are not actual, but are set, and wherein failure does not bring the disaster of war time or result in the consequences encountered in civil life. The Governor says very truly that in real life, from which the civilian officers came to the great Army, there was one unvarying standard of success—a man must make good; and that there a position requiring efficiency must be won and kept by actual merit. He asserts that notoriously unfit officers of the regular establishment who had served long and colorless careers kept their commands.

We must admit that the Army has been without a system by which the retention of officers in service and their advancement have had any very close relation to their merits. Promotion up to the grade of colonel has been by seniority, with absence of competition, and the method of securing the elimination of the unfit through a qualifying examination for promotion has failed to work. In the first eleven years of the life of the law prescribing examination for promotion, from 1890 till the reorganization of the Army in 1901, after the Spanish war, not a single officer was forced out of the Army by the application of the law. If no more than fifty officers had been eliminated during this long period, the law would have been a conspicuous failure; but the entire absence of a list of casualties before 1901, and the extreme paucity of the list in the intervening time up to the present, seem to demonstrate that officers will not put one another out of the service for mere inefficiency, unless through the operation of rigid law from

which there can be no escape. There has been such a law in the Navy since 1899, with a short interval.

The arguments for a merit system in the lives of men, and the reasons why the public service should not go so far beyond the rule of civil life as to assure the measure of success according with the grade of colonel to every one entering at the bottom and behaving himself, are so well known that I shall not take time to rehearse them. I shall, instead, ask the attention of the readers of the REVIEW to the principal objections which have been advanced against the establishment of a merit system in the Army, and the answers to them. The essentials of such a system should provide for at least a proportion of promotions to be by selection, under proper guarantees, and for the elimination of the least fit, with pecuniary recognition of the length of service rendered by them.

An objection which is always raised against selection in promotion is the difficulty of insuring impartiality in its operation. It is urged that it would be impossible to exclude political influence and the influence of favoritism, and examples are cited of the exercise of both in the appointments made to some of the staff corps under the conditions of permanent tenure in these corps which obtained before the Spanish war. This objection is a serious one, and any plan for selection should meet it. The appointments referred to were made by the President—usually, though not always, upon the recommendation of the Secretary of War; and both of these officials must necessarily be subject to political influence. This is not said in a critical sense; but our Government being one of checks and balances is also to a certain extent one of compromises. That is, the legislative and the executive branches must get along with each other; and it may be a very doubtful question which way the duty of an Executive lies when an important piece of legislation, of undoubted value to the public service, is subject to the control of some one who is urging an appointment which ought not to be made. Officers are excusable for hesitating to commit their professional advancement to the play of influences like these. But a method of avoiding them can be found by enacting the rule that selections shall be made upon the recommendations of boards of officers, which are difficult to reach with such influences. It is not easy to get at a military

board. Politicians never attempt it; it would be too dangerous. And yielding to personal influence would require collusion, which is so difficult to attain that most of the safeguards for the prevention of fraud in commercial life are based upon its rarity.

We do not often stop to consider how much selection we have in the public service which is not influenced politically. The graduates of West Point are arranged in the order of their merit by a board of Army officers, acting in accordance with the law. No one in political life ever attempts to influence the arrangement, and it is accepted by the Army as being honestly arrived at. It is very important, too, for it governs the advancement of most of those concerned during practically all of their career, being never afterward reviewed. But it has queer features. For example: the lowest graduate of a class remains constantly above the highest graduate of the next following class who goes into the same branch of the service. Another striking truth is that if there should be but one vacancy in the Army when the last graduate of the Military Academy remained to be assigned, and it should be wanted for the son of the most influential member of the party in power, the graduate, though the son of a laborer, would be considered first, and the son of the public man would have to wait.

Another objection advanced is the difficulty of discriminating between officers in accordance with their merits. Officers are stationed far apart, under different commanders, and objectors believe that their chance of advancement would depend upon the fortuitous knowledge of them which might be in the possession of members of the selecting boards. Selections for the General Staff are cited, which are made by boards of general officers. All officers know of men who should have been selected for that body before others who actually were selected. The difficulty can, in large degree, be met by forming the boards from officers of the same branch of the service as that in which the promotions are to be made, and including in their membership officers of rank just above the eligible grade. They would thus have a closer knowledge of the candidates than that possessed by the members of the boards selecting officers for the junior grades of the General Staff. Officers soon achieve a reputation in their branch of the service,

and it is possible to promote accuracy of selection by a system of reports of superiors in which discrimination is compulsory; as by requiring that those of the same grade be arranged by the reporting officer in the order in which he would recommend them for promotion, taking into consideration all their characteristics, their seniority and the best interests of the service. Those who allege that under such a system officers would devote themselves to currying favor with their superiors, instead of to an honest performance of their duties, evince a low estimate of the manner in which the good opinion of the officers of our Army is to be gained, and represent the service as composed of such poor material in the upper grades as to make it difficult for any change of system to make it worse.

But there is no necessity for extreme accuracy in distinguishing officers of nearly equal merit. The case is not one of a number of candidates on a plane, with the task that of selecting the best one with precision, under pain of failure of function, and injustice. The eligibles are already arranged in order of precedence, which need not be disturbed unless good reason for doing so is seen, and seniority can always be followed when discrimination is found to be difficult. Injustice is not done unless an inferior man is passed over a better one; and after all, it must be remembered that ideal justice to officers is not the object of a military establishment. Although efficiency cannot be had where, in the main, there is not justice, the good of the service should be sought even at the risk of occasional failure of exact justice to an individual's supposed vested rights. Boards of officers are expert in the profession, and that selection can be discriminatingly made by them is evidenced by the character of the General Staff since the establishment of that body in 1903. Although perfection cannot be claimed, and improvement of method is possible, all officers can appreciate a comparison of the Staff as it has existed with what it would have been if the officers for it had been taken off the top of their various grades by seniority—the method by which the upper grades of other branches are formed.

Some opponents of selection maintain that, even if it were possible to carry the system out efficiently, it would do more harm than good. They aver that an officer passed over in promotion by a junior would be so disheartened

and aggrieved that his usefulness would be ended, and that he would become a center of discontent, breathing discouragement and poisoning the moral atmosphere about him. In answer to this it may be said that such effect would not be probable if we should cease to train officers to look for advancement in regular order, irrespective of merit, as a natural right. A careless or indifferent officer needs a sharp reminder that his course is not approved, and no better one can be given than to select a junior ahead of him. If he is of the right stuff, and his inefficiency has been due to thoughtlessness, such an incident should wake him up and inspire him with a determination to recover his loss, and even to win afterward the reward which he had seen pass to another. But if this kind of stimulus should not appeal to him, he would still realize that the selective process had not stopped, and that if he should be passed over again he would be in danger of being overtaken by the eliminative process. And if he should be so constituted as to be stirred by neither sense of duty, the hope of reward, nor the fear of punishment, elimination would catch him, and the service would be rid of the sore spot.

As to elimination: There are many who think that it would soon reach its limit of usefulness by retiring all of the really inefficient; and that thereafter its continued application would deprive the service of officers sufficiently alert to be useful, who would carry their expensively acquired experience with them into retirement. It is not impossible that such a stage might be reached. It would depend, for one thing, upon the drastic character of the eliminative process—whether, for example, it should be sufficiently conservative to call for the retirement of only such officers as would fail of promotion until after reaching an age at which they would not be well fitted for entering upon the duties of the next higher grade. But however this may be, the process would always be an improving one, since, even without selection in promotion, its operation would result in a continual removal of the poorest material and its replacement by the average; which would keep on raising the level, no matter how long it were carried on.

WILLIAM CROZIER.